

Developing a Theme in Social Studies: An Alternative Approach

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Introduction

Beyond Chalk and Talk

The Council of Europe in its documents on the place of History in Secondary schools, states that 'the teacher who stands in front of the class with a chalk is almost soundly condemned as the teacher who uses the stick'.

The statement, directed to teachers who still insist on boring their students by chalking and talking, leaves no room for interpretation. It is direct and clear, emphasizing that: beyond the world of soar throats and chalky air there is a wealth of resources that can inject interest and curiosity, make possible variation of teaching methods, provide stimuli for the fantasy world of students, acquaint students with research techniques, make it easier for students to pursue self-instruction, show the relation of previously isolated facts, relate abstract generalisations with realistic details and, above all, add clarity and precision to the way the lesson is presented.

The teaching of Social Studies has to be reconsidered in the light of the above message. Teachers are no taxidermists. The stuffing of students with useless information has to stop. Alternatives exist. The use of resources is one of them.

The Theme

The wealth of information already available, the potential knowledge in the form of human experiences and the number of sites connected to the theme, qualify Transport as an ideal theme in any secondary level, social studies syllabus.

Transport is a multi-faceted theme. Aspects of transport include:

- (a) *Chronology*: this aspect refers to the development of transport through the ages;
- (b) *Description*: this aspect enters into the 'anatomy' of particular forms of transport and the various facts connected to them;
- (c) *Socio-economic background*: this aspect refers to the different social groups and their respective socio-economic background, as reflected in the different types of transport used;
- (d) *Demographic/land changes*: this aspect deals with the changes in settlement patterns and in

demographic distribution, brought about by the development of better means of transport;

(e) *Other Communications*: Development of better communications runs parallel with the development of better transport. This aspect deals with the influence that transport and other communications exert on each other.

(f) *Historical reality*: this aspect deals with the historical context in which particular forms of transport were introduced or discarded.

Resources ensure the full development of the above aspects and the gross participation of all students. A discussion of the resources will now follow.

The Resources

For practical purposes, resources have been classified under four major headings: Audio, Resource Persons, Visuals and Sites.

Audio

(i) Recorded Interview

A recorded interview can be either *descriptive*, that is, the interviewed are only required to relate their experience/s, or *deductive*, in which case the interviewed are required to make conclusions, using their experience as background information.

In relation to the main theme, the recorded interview can be used to cover various topics. Typical examples include:

Descriptive

- (a) An old timer who is interviewed on a particular form/particular forms of transport now extinct (ex. train, tram or harbour ferry boats).
- (b) An interview with an official who is asked to describe the organization of the means of transport which he represented/represents;
- (c) An interview with a historian who is asked to give a general overview of transport through the ages;
- (d) An empathic interview with a bus driver.

Deductive

- (a) Advantages and disadvantages of an all-private transport — interview with the general public; a public transport official; a local car dealer;
- (b) Abolition of all means of private transport — for and against — an interview with the general public; a traffic police; a local car dealer;
- (c) Public transport: a 24hr. service — suggestions. An interview with the general public.

On the basis of the above examples, one can distinguish between a personal, one to one, descriptive interview and a deductive interview involving the general public.

In both cases, students participate actively by preparing the questions and effecting the interviews. In this situation, the teacher assumes the dual role of an advisor and quality controller, guarding against ambiguous, ill-phrased, unnecessary questions.

Students should be encouraged to look for the individuals which will eventually be interviewed — family friends, neighbours, relatives, important village people.

(ii) Simulated News-Bulletin

A simulated news-bulletin can cover a whole range of topics relating to transport. A few news items are listed below:

- (a) news of a maiden voyage (ex. tram's maiden voyage on 23rd February 1903);
- (b) news of the introduction of a new form of public transport (ex. train);
- (c) news of strikes by public transport workers;
- (d) news of incidents;
- (e) news of extinction of a particular form of transport;
- (f) news of the introduction of new routes (ex. tram: introduction of new routes — 14th March 1904).

News items can be followed by interviews. The following are some examples:

- (a) news item: extinction of a new form of transport;
interview: nostalgic recalls
- (b) news item: incident;
interview: eyewitnesses;
- (c) news item: introduction of a new form of transport;
interview: people's first reaction.

A full news bulletin prepared by the pupils can follow an abridged form of the same news bulletin, prepared by the teacher as a model (the use of work directives is important to direct the pupils in finding information about particular news items).

Division of labour is highly recommended. Students are divided into groups and given different tasks:

Group A: Research; Group B: Script writing; Group C: Recording; Group D: Preparation of slides or pictures to complement the news bulletin.

(iii) Simulated Radio Programme

Radio programmes are preferably prepared in groups. Each group is assigned a particular theme or task, depending on the nature of the programme. If, for example, the programme's aim is the *development of transport through the ages*, each group is assigned a particular era:

- Group A: Transport in Prehistoric times;
- Group B: Transport in Medieval times;
- Group C: Transport in British times;
- Group D: Transport today.

If, on the other hand, the programme is aimed at concentrating on one particular form of transport, each group is assigned a particular aspect:

- Group A: Socio-economic background;
- Group B: Description of the particular form of transport;
- Group C: Its effects on the local population.

On the organizational level, within each group there should be individuals in charge of:

- (a) Production: (i) preparing background music, (ii) recording, (iii) script writing
- (b) Research.

Teachers should ensure that their class is well equipped with a library on transport. Work directives — outlining the details to be covered by the group — will facilitate understanding of the group's tasks and direct the students to the appropriate sources.

(iv) Documentary

Documentaries can take different forms:

- (a) T.V. Programme: In this case, one can either set up a completely new programme or adapt the radio programme.

A documentary will obviously need pictures. Pictures, prepared by teacher and students, range from:

- (1) Slides: Ready-made slides
- (2) Slides: Acetate or glass slides;
- (3) Strip Cartoons;
- (4) Pictures enlarged by an epidioscope on a smaller scale...;
- (5) Photocopied pictures;
- (6) Line diagrams.

Drama can compensate for lack of movement caused by the absence of films.

- (b) Documentary to accompany a visit: this would take the form of a running documentary which would describe the site or the items to be seen.

Example: a visit to former railway stations.

For this particular example the following points could be treated:

- (1) The route followed by the train;
- (2) The stations (in this case it would be a good idea if old pictures of the actual station are distributed among the students while the documentary is explaining that particular site);
- (3) Habitation round the stations.

The documentary would be useless if it is not accompanied by an appropriate information sheet which would indicate the places or items to look at, while the documentary is explaining that particular place or time.

(v) Recorded Maltese Folk Songs

Maltese Folk Songs (ex. 'Il Karozzin' or 'Il-Vapur ta' l-Art') add enjoyment and can be used to introduce a particular form of transport.

(vi) Recorded Play

This source is preferably prepared by the teacher and read by the pupils. The playing of the recording is ideally accompanied by the script (which is photocopied and distributed to the students to follow the recording).

The same play can be dramatized. In this case, students can participate by: preparing sound for background music, preparing props and acting.

Recorded plays are ideal for covering themes like:

- (a) Preparations for the introduction of railway in Malta. Such a play would include: discussions between government officials and company representatives regarding sites of stations, prices, timetable, number and quality of employees, target date, inauguration programme, etc.
- (b) Conversation between two people boarding a first class, train cabin, from Valletta to Mdina.
- (c) A conversation between two dockyard workers before boarding the harbour ferry.

Resource Persons

Resource Persons can be of Various Types:

- (1) Parent/relative/friend of students or teacher;
- (2) Person from town/village (or outside) who is/was directly concerned with transport (ex. a karozzin driver, a bus driver, a taxi driver);
- (3) Individuals who have effected studies on this subject;
- (4) Persons who are directly concerned with the building of a particular form of transport (ex. a bus body-builder, a 'serkin' maker);
- (5) Government officials who are working/have worked in this sector;

- (6) Private owner of a public means of transport;
- (7) Town planner.

Resource Persons can:

either be asked to come to class, or if he is an owner of a particular form of transport, the teacher can take the pupils to the place where the owner keeps his means of transport. The actual concrete object will help the owner to explain better, for example, the parts of his means of transport, or if the individual is a builder of a particular form of transport, the teacher can take the pupils to his workshop, or at times, resource persons can be combined' (ex. owner and historian: owner describes his means of transport — its structure and how it works — the historian explains the history of that particular means of transport).

Resource persons can be recorded. However, their physical presence is strongly recommended.

Visual

(i) Games

(a) Board Games (Reality)

A realistic board game is one which represents an actual historical situation. Normally, it would take the form of a contemporary map of the period. By following a set of rules, the pupils have to reach a certain goal. Rules and guide lines are contained in information sheets.

Reality games, which can be played either individually or in groups, are usually divided into three phases:

- (a) Choice of site;
- (b) Progressive development of an outline map;
- (c) Class debate.

The following themes can be easily transformed into a board game:

- (a) Selecting a site to develop it into a train station;
- (b) Selecting a particular area and plan a series of railway tracks to cover the area;
- (c) Planning a second, central, bus-stop station.

(b) Board Games (Abstraction)

These games are constructed on the same lines as commercial games, such as 'monopoly', 'snakes and ladders' and 'ludo'.

Such games are easily adapted to suite different purposes. Typical examples include:

Ludo

A ludo game can be devised to illustrate various forms of transport now extinct, their routes and their respective termini.

The corner boxers would represent termini or stations of four different forms of transport. The central boxes represent Valletta, so that all forms of transport are directed to the city. The normal, common lane is replaced by four lanes running concurrently. Each lane represents the route taken by a particular form of transport.

Snakes and Ladders

This game could be used either to illustrate the development of a specific form of transport (ex. transport by sea) or to represent the general/historical development of transport.

(c) *Simulated Games*

These games would require space. The school's playground is ideal.

The following is an example of a simulated game which should serve as a model for others:

With the help of a map, students draw the route, which was once taken by the train on ground. Each station is marked four steps away from the nearest station. Students are then asked to organize themselves into groups. All groups start from the terminal station (Valletta or Mdina station).

Students are asked to choose one from four possible boarding tickets: (a) first class, (b) second class, (c) third class, (d) working class. Each ticket represents the level of difficulty of the question which will be asked to the group, that is: (a) very difficult (b) slightly less difficult (c) fairly difficult (d) easy. A good answer for type (a) question will entitle the group to move from one station to another (four steps), for type (b) question three steps, and so on. Groups can change the ticket and, therefore, the level of difficulty, from one turn to another. The group which reaches the opposite terminus first will be the winner.

(ii) *Cards*

(a) *Information Cards*

Information cards usually consist of written information about a very specific topic. Information cards are normally illustrated by pictures or diagrams. Appropriate illustrations are very important since the number of words in such cards is restricted.

The use of information cards ranges from providing background information to introducing or concluding a lesson. They can cover a lot of topics, ranging from descriptive (ex. information about the history of a particular form of transport) to informative (ex. information on where extinct forms of transport can still be seen).

A library of information cards could be set up in one of the corners of the class.

(b) *Individual Task Cards*

Task cards aim at fulfilling the needs of a

mixed-ability class. Task cards basically consist of: (a) a question or statement; (b) information on where to find the answer for the question/statement; (c) drawing/s.

Tasks cards are graded according to difficulty. Vertical grading refers to the progression in difficulty from one task card to another. Longitudinal grading refers to the grouping of task cards according to difficulty.

By preparing different task cards, teachers give each student a task suited to his ability. In this way, students can work at their own pace and complete their task in time.

(c) *Assignment Cards*

Assignment cards usually follow information cards. However, they are not necessarily directly connected to them. Assignment cards usually require students to: answer questions (factual and/or intuitive), interpret pictures or figures, draw figures.

A library of assignment cards can also be set up in class.

(d) *Work Directives*

Work directives are generally used during museum or site visits. Work directives usually consist of:

- (a) Instructions to look at: (i) a museum piece (ex. a sedan chair) or (ii) a specific part of a site;
- (b) Specific instructions to effect manual work (ex. measuring the length, depth, width of a 'cart-rut')
- (c) Instructions to draw (ex. a museum piece);
- (d) Answer questions;
- (e) Write comments;

(iii) *Primary Source Material*

Primary source material related to transport includes originals or copies of: newspapers, tickets, timetables, government statistics, chronicles, photographs, postcards, souvenirs, paintings, wood-cuts and litographs.

(iv) *Secondary Source Material*

Transport has been treated by professional and amateur historians. Popular and academic literature on the subject can be found at the national library.

(v) *Simulated Documents*

Teachers can transform their background knowledge into simulated documents. Simulated documents can take different forms: (a) newspapers (ex. reporting: introduction or end of a means of transport, new routes, new time-tables, accidents; increase or decrease in fares, strikes, etc.); (b) parish magazine (ex. reporting: introduction of new routes to town/village; village/transport statistics, accidents in town/village, etc.); (c) official documents (ex. minutes of meetings held

between company representatives and government officials prior to the introduction of the railway system in Malta).

(vi) Puzzles

(a) Jigsaw Puzzles

Pictures related to transport (ex. picture of a map showing the route followed by the train, picture of a tram, ferry boat or sedan chair, etc.) are glued on a cardboard paper. Before cutting each picture into pieces, a typed paper with information about the subject (depicted in the picture) is stuck to the back of each picture. When students form the picture, they turn it upside down and read the information. Instead of information, one can put questions or instructions to look for information in the class library.

(b) Word Puzzles

Students are best organized in groups. Each group will construct its own word puzzle. Groups will then exchange puzzles.

(vii) Models

Collecting transport models is one of the most favourite hobbies among students (especially boys). Models of cars, lorries, bicycles, trains, carts, trams, karozzini, etc., can be brought into class and displayed in a transport museum.

(viii) Artefacts

Where ready-made models are not easy to obtain, students can be directed to construct their own models. Needless to say, models which are elaborate and difficult to produce should be avoided.

Artefacts should be produced from material readily available at schools, preferably cardboard paper. Clear instructions of the stages followed in the building up of the model are to be supplied by the teacher.

(ix) Slides

Students can produce their own slides by using indian ink and acetate sheets. Also, the teacher can organize a trip and ask students to take slides of what is available (ex. museum pieces, cart-ruts, railway stations, train cabins at Marsaskala and B'Kara, etc.).

(x) Time Lines/Charts

One concept which presents early-secondary students with some difficulty is that of time. The use of the most simple form of time chart/line can help to overcome this difficulty. A line of time is the simplest way of representing visually a period of time and it is a very useful way of enabling students to get some idea of the relative length of different periods. The time chart is a useful device for illustrating the correct sequence of events and for bringing out the possible relationship between events.

Time charts/lines can be:

either 'periodical', that is concentrating on a particular period (ex. transport during British rule), or 'general', that is, focusing on no particular period (transport in Malta through the ages); or 'specific', that is, concentrating on a particular form of transport (ex. public transport).

Sites

If we accept as a fact the long-held idea, namely, that the number of ruts which interrupt the surface of the rock, in many parts of the island, are prehistoric cart-ruts then, teachers can choose any of the great number of sites available and organize a fieldwork study on transport in prehistoric times. A fieldwork study of these ruts will eventually consist in describing the site, measuring the ruts (length, width and depth), measuring the area which they cover, drawing a picture of the site and comparing the above observations with observations made for other sites.

Historical sites related to transport are unfortunately limited. The only real, worthy trip is along the route which was once followed by the train, that is, from Valletta station to Museum station at Rabat. Students will eventually be taken to still existent stations, pass through tunnels and over viaducts. Work directives are strongly recommended.

Studies on modern transport can be carried any time on our roads. Students are best organized in groups and placed at strategic points on a major road. Each group is then assigned particular observations (ex. number of women/men using private transport, number of men/women driving company transport, etc.). Back in class, students can build tables (based on statistics) and hold various discussions.

Conclusion

The hard-working, optimistic teacher will immediately complain about the impossibility of ever managing to produce such a vast quantity of resources. He/She may be right. However, the text itself shows that teachers need not produce most of the resources themselves. Resources should eventually form part of an all-activity lesson focusing on the theme of learning by doing. Moreover, teachers can adopt different strategies with different classes. By so doing, the same goal will be reached and a number of resources will be used/produced by each class. These resources can be pooled and exhibited. A 'Transport Day' can also be organized at school, where drama, slide and sound shows, discussions, interviews and games will eventually figure among the major activities.